

Archaeology of the A66

Back in the Market Hall once more, in October, John Zant of Oxford Archaeology North, gave members an interesting account of archaeological investigations carried out in advance of road improvements on the A66 back in 2006/7.

Work of this nature is a standard requirement on such developments but is generally a rather unnatural way of gathering archaeological information since it is of course guided by engineering considerations rather than archaeological criteria and is largely a case of "seeing what turns up". The area opened for investigation is the narrow strip defined by the roadworks themselves and, given the circumstances, the methods employed are generally fairly heavy-handed.

Nevertheless, this type of investigation provides an opportunity to take a "cross-sectional" view of the archaeology over wide areas of the countryside. Also, where it is known in advance that the roadworks cross an area of particular interest, the civil-engineering works provide an opportunity to carry out investigations which would probably otherwise be impossible.

John described how the A66 work provided a perfect illustration of these points.

The A66 investigations related to the eastern end of the road between Greta Bridge and Scotch Corner. Very little was observed at the Greta Bridge end and John's talk concentrated on the more interesting discoveries towards Scotch Corner.

Occupation during the wide period ranging from the Mesolithic through to the early Bronze Age was poorly represented. Only a handful of flints were observed, along with a single piece of late Neolithic grooved ware pottery dated to the period 2300-2000BC.

The early-middle Iron Age (700-100BC) was represented by traces of enclosures, a roundhouse and timber structures adjacent to the known site at Rock Castle. A four-post structure here was radiocarbon dated to 800-200BC,

At Scotch Corner itself, geophysical surveying had already detected substantial areas of large Iron Age occupation in the fields on either side of the road. These were fully confirmed by the road development. It seemed that this occupation had preceded the Roman period but had been greatly expanded subsequently. The suggestion was that these were farms that had supplied the Roman garrisons. Evidence for this was the presence of shards of samian and other imported wares alongside the much rougher local pottery. The suggestion was that during this period wealth was trickling down from larger centres elsewhere.

A particular feature which the archaeologists had been very pleased to have the opportunity to investigate was the so-called Scots Dyke. This is an enigmatic earthwork some 10m wide and 1.5m high with a ditch on the eastern side. It runs for some 14 kilometres in a generally northern direction from Richmond to an apparently abrupt termination close to the major centre of Iron Age occupation at Stanwick. It is believed that Stanwick may have been the administrative centre for the Brigantes at the time of the Roman invasion. It is thought that the Scots Dyke dates originally from the Iron Age but was possibly re-used in later periods

At the point where the Scots Dyke was intersected by the A66 developments, archaeologists were able to observe it as a V-shaped ditch which unfortunately proved to be almost entirely devoid of archaeology. Examination of the sedimentary infill suggested that the Dyke had been half full filled-in by 600AD and completely filled by the 13th Century. Little more could be said.

Later developments were represented by the Roman Fort at Carlin Moor where a coin of Vespasian, dated 200AD was recovered. No traces of the Roman road itself were ever seen.

The excavations have been extensively documented and the reports are available both in full and as a modestly-priced booklet "The Archaeology of the A66".

John was thanked for a most interesting talk